

# Caste and Mobility

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*According to Dr Harold Gould (The Economic Weekly, June 24, 1961) as the high castes lose ground in the old caste hierarchy they turn to westernisation for new sources of status and power. This, he believes, is confirmed by greater mobility among the high castes in the direction of urban employment.*

*This is a new interpretation of the term 'westernisation',*

*To equate the desire for urban employment among the high castes with the desire for westernisation is, however, untenable.*

*Equally, if the low castes have moved less to the urban areas, this is for such reasons as 'lack of education, of economic power and of well-elaborated kith and kinship structures which can be avenues of connection and mobility', and not to any innate urge to remain in the villages and get Sanskritised.*

FROM his observation in a number of villages in U P and Delhi, Dr Gould finds that the main thesis of Professor Srinivas—that the 'higher' castes are moving away from Sanskritisation just, as the 'lower' ones are moving into its fold—is correct. He then examines the motives underlying this trend and expresses the opinion that as the higher castes are "losing ground in the old caste hierarchy, they are reaching out in a direction we can best call westernisation . . . in order to obtain new sources of status and power". He finds confirmation of this phenomenon in the fact that "mobility in the direction of urban and modern employment is more preponderant . . . among the high than among the low castes". His personal observations and those of a few others persuade him that low-caste mobility is correspondingly less.

This shows, first that for Gould the desire for Government service and for other salaried jobs (let us call them "urban careers") found in the higher castes is synonymous with westernisation. This is a new interpretation of the term 'westernisation', not found in Srinivas. To be fair to the latter, one may remark that many orthodox Brahmins have been occupying some of the highest posts in the Government all these years. For them westernisation in education, dress, manners etc has never signified the abandonment of the shuistic ritual. In proof thereof one need only go round any big town, especially on a holiday and see the fervour with which such 'westernised' people participate in various religious activities. It is, therefore, somewhat difficult to agree with Gould in this respect and equate the higher castes with a desire for

westernisation although these jobs, the products of a western system, do facilitate the process of westernisation, as understood by Srinivas.

## Greater Mobility ?

It may also be relevant to examine his statement about 'the surprisingly high prevalence of elite mobility and the correspondingly low prevalence of low caste mobility by comparison with the former'. He feels that in this domain the reality appears to be at variance with 'classical' expectations. In other words he suggests that the mobility of higher castes towards 'urban careers' is now greater than in the past and that the lower castes are moving in lesser numbers to "urban careers" than the higher castes. Here Gould could have taken recourse to some statistical data. All that he offers us, however, is his observations and those of Fames and Oscar Lewis.

The first thing to note in this connection is that there has been, for quite some time now, a good proportion of higher caste men of rural areas, in urban careers, in the Government, in large business undertakings, in higher education (colleges universities) persons coming from rural areas, that is from zamindur or trader families, have had a good share, at least in the North. Once in service they have been a pole of attraction for their village-based kith and kin. The greater urge, at present, among them may thus be explained by the greater number of similar jobs available, now.

As regards the proportionately lesser number of lower castes coming to urban centres, probably Gould is not on very sure ground. One look at the steadily growing 'jhuggistans'

(a term coined by some of his compatriots to denote a New Delhi slum), may persuade him to the contrary. The overwhelming majority of the residents of such areas belong to the lower castes and they hail from villages. They have been coming to towns because of better conditions of work and living (even in town slums) than in the villages. It is also well-known that the mill workers of towns like Calcutta, Bombay, Kanpur etc hail from certain professional (low-ranking) castes belonging to definite areas of the country viz the Mahars in Bombay.

## Economic Factors

While examining the motive behind this urge for urban careers, Gould attributes to the higher castes the desire to use westernisation as a prop for their declining social superiority, especially as the lower castes take to Sanskritisation. Having cited a number of cases where higher caste people have preferred 'real economic hardship' for placing a member in town and, on the other hand, where a lower caste family, though well-off, has not cared to migrate to an urban area, he feels that "strictly economic grounds are insufficient to explain what is happening." But is that really so? Facts seem to be somewhat more complicated. Gould may not have noticed it but there is, at present a new trend among "business-families", who, always looked with scorn at Government jobs to place some of their children in salaried jobs. For this phenomenon one may have to accept mainly economic and political reasons (these being two of the three axes of power of the cast system, as Gould quotes from Srinivas). These new competitors for salaried

posts are increasing the number of higher caste people in search for places in both the private and the public sectors. One reason lies in the wide-spread belief that small-scale private enterprise no longer has a bright future. If the urge for service has increased in the villages out of proportion to the increase in such jobs and in accord with the reduction of productive employment in the villages, then this may also be traceable to the reason given above and not merely to 'ritual' motives, as Gould believes.

#### Lower Castes

What about the lower castes? We have already observed that they have been moving to urban areas in large numbers. If this number is proportionately less, then the reason for this is to be found in factors such as the 'lack of education, of economic powers and of well-elaborated kith and kinship structures which can be avenues of connection and mobility'. Not one of these can be due to any innate urge of the lower castes to remain village-based and get Sanskritised. In fact the phenomenon of Sanskritisation among such people is proceeding apace even when they have become town-based. This is implicit in Srinivas.

It is possible that as the lower castes become Sanskritised, they will find the upper classes more and more westernised. But we have also to keep in mind the facilities now offered to lower caste persons to climb into higher classes such as reservation in Government service, free education with scholarship. Lower standards for admission to institutions of higher learning, etc. These efforts are beginning to bear fruit. As a result, in another generation or so a good proportion of persons of lower castes will have become used to high class living and will have been as much westernised as the rest.

Although Gould did not intend his explanation 'to be construed as an attempt to provide the explanation of change and mobility in Indian society today.' and did not mean it to be made 'applicable in all situations—of change and mobility'—we are afraid that he has misunderstood Srinivas, has given a new connotation to the term 'westernisation', crediting it to Srinivas and has offered explanations which need to be substantiated.

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### American Economic Association

Evanston, Illinois

## AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW

Volume LI

September, 1961

Number 4

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